

REFERENCE AND DIVINITY

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The day is over when we could make the extravagant claim that religious discourse is senseless. The question remains, however, "what is the sense of such discourse?" The most sensible place to begin is with the subject term 'God' and its synonyms since if this first order subject term is bereft of logical account, its attachable predicates will never attain the status of genuinity.

In this paper I wish to argue that 'God' is neither a proper name nor a descriptive term *simpliciter* but is instead a term belonging to another and different category, namely, that of titles. And although Professor Nelson Pike in his book, *God and Timelessness*,¹ offers a similar escape from the name-cum-description fetish to the one I offer, I shall argue that his thesis is still far too reliant upon the descriptive aspect of the fetish that I have come to think must be avoided.

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Ordinarily our first acquaintance with religious discourse displays no special philosophical problems concerning reference. In learning such discourse it does not normally occur to us to express concern over the possible non-existence of its purported referent. Accordingly, the status of the subject term 'God' in first-order claims is at least similar, if not identical, to the purported referent in discourse about Santa Claus, or about some unseen and distant uncle that one's elders occasionally discussed. It is not similar, however, to discourse about Little Miss Muffet, Jack Horner or Moby Dick. For we are quick to learn that the employment of such names carries with them a pretended referent, though in neither case is their linguistic assimilability logically suspect. The unfortunate discovery that 'Santa Claus' must revert to the position of a pretended referent, while our unseen Uncle Fred need not, subsequently carries with it the idea that 'God' is a suspicious candidate for either slot. Furthermore, since adjudication and commandment concerning the term's profanation is generally thought to be tantamount to taking "the Lord's *name* in vain," for the philosophically uninitiated perhaps what remains in all this conceptual disruption is that somehow 'God' gets the status of a proper name.

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Naïve attractions aside, philosophical sophistication arises when one questions the criteria whereby the term is assessed either as a proper name or as a description. Without accommodating views which overlap one another, such as that held by Ian Crombie, who regards the term 'God' as an *improper proper name*, and Norris Clarke, who opts for the notion that the term must be considered as both a proper name and a description, those who opt for either of these views may be called proper name theorists and descriptive theorists respectively. Thus while it is difficult to clearly label Origen and Clement of Alexandria as proper name theorists, there is no similar difficulty in so labelling Professors Paul Tillich, John Hick and Paul Ziff. On the other side Aquinas, Anselm, Bertrand Russell and Peter Geach are among the ranks of the descriptive theorists.

A most recent supporter of the descriptive theorists is Nelson Pike. His view, however, is that the term 'God' is a special kind of description, *viz.*, a title-term. The view has much to commend it. For one thing it accounts for the occurrence of the term both as a logical subject and a predicate expression. As he says:

Given a linguistic community in which 'Caesar' in 'Hadrian is Caesar' is well understood, if one were to refer to or address an individual as 'Caesar', one would communicate that the individual of whom, or to whom, one is speaking is Emperor of Rome. Though 'Caesar' in 'Caesar went riding in the afternoon' looks like a proper name, it carries the descriptive import that attends it in 'Hadrian is Caesar'. There thus appears to be an important contrast between 'Caesar' . . . and an ordinary name such as 'Hadrian'. . . . In referring to or addressing Hadrian as 'Hadrian', one would not have communicated the fact that the individual of whom, or to whom, one is speaking is Emperor of Rome.²

Pike's view rests on the assumption (shared by many) that "God (if He exists) is a *being*—a single individual possessing negative as well as positive attributes."³ And certainly on this assumption the notion that 'God' is a title-term is a fairly compelling one. It has another compelling feature in that it grants *a priori* and necessary status to certain familiar propositions of the form 'God is ϕ ', where the function ' ϕ ' stands for predicables expressing divine attributes. As Pike argues:

It is a logically necessary condition of bearing the title 'God' (e.g., it is a logically necessary condition of being 'Ruler of the Universe' or a being than which no greater can be conceived) that the individual bearing the title be perfectly good, omnipotent, omniscient and the like.⁴

It is necessarily true for example that the Prince of Wales has no right to a seat in the House of Lords and that he must be a male in the direct line of the reigning monarch, etc. Thus one of the merits of Pike's thesis is that at least the question of the propositional status of certain God-talk is made logically respectable.

Unfortunately Pike's view of the status of the subject term 'God' has serious demerits. One of these demerits lies in his argument that the logical status of 'God' is such that it is a title term. He claims as follows:

If we could assume that in order to be Emperor (as opposed to Empress) of Rome it is required that one be male (as opposed to female), then if 'Caesar' means 'Emperor of Rome', the statement, 'If X is Caesar, then X is male' would have precisely the same logical status as the one I am here assuming for 'If X is God, then X is perfectly good', 'If X is God, then X is omnipotent', etc.⁵

Here it is being argued that the proposition 'If X is Caesar, then X is male' has the same logical status as 'If X is God, then X is omnipotent'. This, however, is inconsistent with his own working assumption, *viz.*, that "God (if He exists) is *a being*—a single individual." For while we can say of Augustus and Hadrian, etc., that they were among the bearers of the title 'Caesar', only a single individual can be the bearer of the title 'God'. Any bearer of the title 'Emperor of Rome' must be male, but is it correct to say *any* bearer of the title 'God' must be omniscient? 'Caesar' is a general term, since it is a title that may have many bearers. 'God' is not a general term in the monotheistic discourse Pike seeks to analyse. If there is a God and He is the Ruler of the Universe, the title makes a uniquely identifying reference to a non-temporal particular. In which case the title is non-devolving, *i.e.*, there can not have been a time when God was not the bearer of the title. If we assume that God (if He exists) is a single individual, we cannot assume that Caesar (if there is one—if he exists?) is a single individual and thereby assume that when these two titles instantiate the propositional function 'If X is T, then X is ϕ ', (where 'T' and ' ϕ ' are necessarily related), that the resultant propositions have precisely the same logical status. The quantification of their subject terms is dissimilar. 'Caesar' has the force of an indefinite description; 'God' has the force similar to that of a definite description. Thus 'any Caesar (Emperor of Rome) is male' though necessarily true would not on Pike's monotheistic assumption be identical to 'any God is omniscient', etc. There was at most one Caesar at a certain time expresses a matter of fact, though there being exactly one or at most one Caesar is by his own formula excluded. If, along with Pike, we assume that there is *only* one God, we can only say "There is at most one God." Symbolically this is rendered:

$$(x) \{ Gx \supset (y) [Gy \supset (x = y)] \}$$

This does not say that there are any Gods, instead it says that there is not more than one God. The proposition is true if there is no God and true if there is exactly one. The reason for the inclusion of the universal quantifier is that we do not have to suppose that there is any God, thus conforming to the hypothetical form of Pike's proposition, *viz.*, 'If X is God, X is omniscient', etc. My objection is simply that this uniqueness is not included in 'If X is Caesar, X is male', (*i.e.*, if X is Caesar, X is a person and male). The symbolic rendering of this is:

$$(x) [Cx \supset (Px \cdot Mx)]$$

And while the instantiation of this excludes dogs, it nonetheless retains its hypothetical intent without implying uniqueness.

I want now to examine another claim that Professor Pike makes when he says:

Titles are expressions that sometime perform the function of a proper name and sometimes appear in linguistic settings that make it difficult to distinguish them from proper names. But titles ought not to be thought of as proper names. They carry elements of meaning that make it advisable to classify them as descriptive terms.⁶

I am afraid that I do not see here what the problem could be. Certainly it is not a syntactical one. And if it is a semantical problem the claim to its identification runs into logical difficulties. For 'Caesar' does not function like a proper name. Using its proxy term 'The Emperor of Rome', then 'The Emperor of Rome is Caesar' is a proposition of identity, similar to 'Tully is Cicero'. The latter is an identity claim using proper names and the former is an identity claim using title expressions. If, e.g., Tully and Cicero were two persons, each being the bearer of only one of the names, or, if there was only one bearer, of only one of the names, then the proposition expressing such an identity would be false regardless of which term is construed as logical subject and which is included in the predicable. Moreover if there were no bearer of either name the identity proposition would be void since the question of its truth or falsity would not arise. Yet the case is not the same at all for Pike's use of title terms. If we use 'The Emperor of Rome' or its proxy expression 'Caesar' then the identity proposition 'Caesar is the Emperor of Rome' is not merely true but necessarily true whether these titles have bearers or not. It has the force of 'No Caesar is not The Emperor of Rome'. To say 'No Tully is not a Cicero' places both 'Tully' and 'Cicero' in the category of general terms and can no longer be used to isolate one nameable from among others. In any case the fact that 'Caesar' or 'The Emperor of Rome' can function as predicables shows neither term can be a proper name. Aristotle's realization that the referential use of a proper name is tenseless, in the sense that its use to refer to a nameable does not countenance temporal qualification whereas predicables do, shows that title terms do not logically function as proper names. The queerness of 'This dead man was Julius Caesar' where 'Caesar' is used as a proper name is not identical with that expressed by 'This dead man was The Emperor of Rome'. Pike's use of such expressions as 'linguistic environment' and 'linguistic settings' does nothing to substantiate his claim that title terms sometimes do function as proper names; consequently I cannot see that there is anything to commend it. Logically, names do not come in contradictory pairs while predicables most certainly do. The expression 'Not Jones' is not a negation of the act of naming the bearer of the name 'Jones'. Though in the predicable '. . . is not Jones', the occurrence of 'Jones' is an occurrence that is divested of its naming function.

It seems as though Pike has written us a cheque on his account of proper names only to cancel it before its genuinity can be tested. Titles

are thus not proper names. The question now is whether or not titles are descriptions. And Pike has suggested that title terms "carry elements of meaning that make it advisable to classify them as descriptive terms." But here again the very analogy by which 'God' and 'Caesar' are assessed as title terms is immediately suspect. Granted most analogies have positive, negative and neutral aspects, nonetheless, there is in Pike's assimilation far too much riding on the neutral and negative aspects of the analogy he uses to elucidate his thesis. Just as the genus denoting term 'animal' is truly predicated of the species denoting term 'man' so 'title term' is predicated of the expression 'God'. All of this without regard to possible *differentia*. If attention is paid to terms of *differentia*, 'God' may turn out not to be so unqualifiedly classified as a descriptive term at all. I want now to examine this albeit in the barest fashion.

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Let us agree that in speaking of a title we are speaking of that set of ways in which a word or series of words, which is neither a name nor a description *simpliciter*, may be used to identify, distinguish, refer, address, honour, or rank persons, places, positions, things and objects (whether abstract or not).

It is characteristic of a title in any of the senses to which I have just alluded that it can be classified as belonging to one of two categories; that is titles are primarily of either a conferrable or non-conferrable kind. Any *omnium gatherum* treatment of the concept of a title, i.e., any analysis of titles that is negligent of this conferrable and non-conferrable distinction can readily be discredited. For books, plays and compositions have and are given titles and subtitles; people have conferred upon them, become heir to, win or earn titles. And from within just these two classes we speak of fictitious titles, hereditary or devolving titles, ironic titles, territorial titles, title-roles, antonomasias, etc. A book or a musical composition is given a title and these I have called non-conferrable; persons receiving knighthoods, degrees, or undergoing investitures and the like are said to have had titles conferred upon them; *sans phrase* persons are conferees, books are not. Thus there are two rather clearly distinguishable classes of titles, viz., one is the class of conferrable titles and the other is the class of non-conferrable titles.⁷

Now non-conferrable titles can mislead if they are taken to be necessarily descriptive of, or a name for, the object or the contents of the object entitled. Nor can they be syntactically characterized as being either a special kind of description or a special kind of proper name. This point can be stated briefly, though nonetheless rather clearly. For we don't need to worry whether or not the author of the book entitled *Forever Amber* was requested to change the title to *The Temporary Temptress* on the grounds that Amber's immortality was falsified, anymore than we expect that most philosophers become indignant over not being included in books entitled *The History of Philosophy*. Certainly *Hamlet* and *Mona Lisa* are titles that have the form of proper

names, just as Shakespeare's *The Rape of Lucrece* and Da Vinci's *The Last Supper* have the form of definite descriptions; but it would be as misleading to conclude from this that the title of a play or a painting is content-describing as it would be to assume that it is content-naming. Whatever we may commend or wish for out of loyalty, the songs entitled 'There'll Always Be an England' and 'The Stars and Stripes Forever' are, albeit unmercifully, not descriptions of fact. For whether we like it or not history attests both to the mortality rather than the immortality of flags, countries and persons, and the exclusion of the relatively unimportant from mention in history books.

Notice here that I do not say that thus and such a title "performs the function of a proper name, etc." Nor do I say that title terms must be considered as descriptions. What I have been arguing is that title terms *per se* are neither proper names nor descriptions in any straightforward manner. Their logics are dissimilar. Let me make the point of my final argument a little more lucid by showing that non-conferrables are not descriptions.

Borrowing an example of Professor Linsky's let us examine the proposition '*The Vicar of Wakefield* is behind the desk'. Linsky claims here that grammatically we cannot tell whether the phrase '*The Vicar of Wakefield*' is used as the name of the novel or a description of the man.⁸ Syntactical criteria then are deficient in epistemological enquiry. As Linsky concludes, "clearly not any expression used to refer to a unique object is a definite description, e.g., proper names are not definite descriptions."⁹ He might well have added conferrable and non-conferrable titles to the list—for syntax alone does not betray function or logic.

If we examine the non-conferrable '*The Vicar of Wakefield*' (i.e., the title of Goldsmith's novel) in the light of Russell's theory of descriptions the resultant analysis shows that non-conferrables are not descriptions.

Using Russell's analysis, his example, "the round square does not exist" is thus reformulated as "It is false that there is one and only one nameable which is both round and square," we can see that the definite description "the round square" has disappeared, and has been replaced by what that description under analysis epistemologically signifies.¹⁰ Now if a non-conferrable title were to replace the original example, *viz.*, "*The Vicar of Wakefield* does not exist," this would be false even if the original were non-existent. One could not analyse it as, "It is false that there is one and only one nameable which is both a vicar and holding that ecclesiastical office in Wakefield" for the resultant reformulation completely distorts the identifying function of the non-conferrable, "*The Vicar of Wakefield*." Such a translation makes it patently clear that non-conferrable titles, even their use in singular expressions, cannot be construed as being definite descriptions. That Russell's elimination or replacement procedure works well with descriptive phrases but will not work with non-conferrables is indicative of their logical difference.

This elimination procedure must similarly be applicable to propositions of the form wherein, e.g., some attribute or characteristic is ascribed to the description in question, viz., "The author of *Waverley* is Scottish." For Russell this is logically equivalent to the conjunction of the following three propositions, viz., that there is:

- (i) at least one author of *Waverley*,
- (ii) at most one author of *Waverley*,
- (iii) nothing is an author of *Waverley* and not Scottish.

This elimination allows statements about vacuous nameables to be true or false. In Russell's terms to say, "The present King of France is bald," though for him it is false, is nonetheless significant even though there is no present King of France. Of course the resultant analysis of an example of a non-conferrable replacing "the author of *Waverley*," viz., "*The Vicar of Wakefield* is behind the desk," does not work out as a conjunction of the propositions:

- (i) at least one thing was vicar of Wakefield,
- (ii) at most one thing was vicar of Wakefield,
- (iii) nothing is vicar of Wakefield and not behind the desk.

Nor can I envisage a way in which it could be so construed. Obviously, such an elimination procedure as with the elimination procedure applied to existential propositions *simpliciter* has a nonsensical result. Obvious, too, is the fact that if in the proposition, "The golden mountain does not exist," the definite description is not a name, neither can its analysis apply to non-conferrables.¹¹

What I have attempted to show then is that Pike's claim that titles are either a special kind of descriptive expression or that they function as proper names is too obtuse. Obtuse in the sense that it fails to distinguish between conferrable and non-conferrable titles. When this distinction is properly made, one can see that the undifferentiated claim that the class of titles contains only descriptive expressions is false for non-conferrables are not essentially descriptive expressions. That conferrables function as proper names is an obscure claim, but that if it means that they function in knowledge claims as proper names the claim is likewise false.

In all fairness, however, I do think Pike's analysis is a move in a more constructive direction than has been possible with identifying reference restricted to the arena of proper names and descriptions. Terms of divinity such as 'Lord of Lords', 'Divine Majesty', 'King of Kings' unlike the term 'God' do suggest themselves as title terms. Despite this suggestion, the mistake is, I think, in assuming the conferrable type title as the model with which to analyse the term 'God'. If we will examine non-conferrables more closely their unique use in making an identifying

reference to the divine nature whether as logical subject or predicable and the *a priori* status of certain predications can be preserved.

NOTES

¹ Nelson Pike, *God and Timelessness* (New York: Schocken Books, 1970).

² *Ibidem*, p. 30. Note: 'Julius Caesar' was a proper name—the term 'Caesar' acquired the status of 'Emperor' later. We will assume its title status throughout unless noted otherwise.

³ *Ibidem*, p. 1.

⁴ *Ibidem*, p. 33.

⁵ *Ibidem*, pp. 33-34.

⁶ *Ibidem*, p. 33.

⁷ Failure to make this distinction has made Russell, Wittgenstein, John Searle and Peter Geach fall afoul in their remarks on titles.

⁸ Leonard Linsky, *Referring* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1967), p. 63.

⁹ *Ibidem*.

¹⁰ Note: For the variety of formulations of this aspect as well as other aspects of the theory of descriptions *vide* *Introduction to Mathematical Philosophy*, Ch. XXVI, also "On Denoting" and "The Philosophy of Logical Atomism" (esp. p. 250), both in *Logic and Knowledge*, and a summary view can be found in Russell's *History of Western Philosophy* (London: George Allen and Unwin, Ltd., 1946), pp. 859-860.

¹¹ Parts of the preceding paragraphs are from my paper "On 'God' as a Non-Conferrable Title," delivered before the Indiana Philosophical Association, 1971, and Arkansas Philosophical Association, 1974.